

A Stolen Gown and a Shouting Match

In this letter, Charles MacIver, a resident of Alexandria, informs Washington of a "disagreeable" altercation between his wife and Charlotte, an enslaved seamstress and housemaid from Mount Vernon. Mrs. MacIver had spotted Charlotte on the street in Alexandria and accused the enslaved woman of wearing her gown, which had been stolen. Charlotte denied the claim, and, according to Mr. MacIver, shouted "abusive & contemptuous Epithets" at his wife.

This incident provides a rare window into the trade in second-hand clothing among the poor and enslaved. Apparently, Mrs. MacIver's dress had been stolen two years earlier by a white beggar woman. The thief fled, trading the dress to an enslaved man in exchange for a boat ride across the Potomac River. The man then gave the gown to his wife, who sold it to another enslaved woman, who sold it to Charlotte. As a seamstress, Charlotte had the skills to alter the dress, though Mrs. MacIver still recognized the fabric's distinctive red-and-white striped pattern.

Charlotte's fate after this incident went unrecorded, but she risked punishment by speaking her mind to Mrs. MacIver. In 1793, Mount Vernon's farm manager whipped Charlotte for being "impudent" and talking back to him.

May it please your Excellency

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Annapolis 17th June 1786.

I am with Reverence & almost by Compulsion that I
trouble your Excellency with an account of an as disagreeable an Occasion. On the
6th instant, my Wife sent me a pressing Message, desiring me to come out
of Court, and speak to her on a very particular Occasion. It seems she
had discovered one particular, a House Maid of your Excellency's, as we
were afterwards informed, dropped in Part of a Garment which was stole
from her two Years ago. My Wife, inexperienced in the Tricks of
the World, and under the Influence of natural Sympathies, had
listened, in my Absence, to a Tale of feigned Distress, and
given a Night's Quarters to a plausible, likely young Woman.
I would not turn her away on Sunday, & the third Day, my Wife
found her a tolerable sempstress. On Tuesday she took a bold
and desperate Resolution to carry off, at Midday, half an
Aph load of Goods, including three elegant, well trimmed Gowns,
two Aprons, &c. belonging to my Wife. In one Place she
was pursued three different Ways, & almost overtaken at
Mile Run, when Chase was given to George Town, and
towards the Falls. But the cunning creature had got
D^r. Stewart's Quarters, where she sold the Gown your Maid had, &
the Apron belonging to it. The latter was taken from a Maid
of D^r. Stewart's at the Races in Oct. 1785. I rightly remember
she said her Mistress had got it for putting the white Woman
over Potomac. As the Negroe was afraid, she had paid for
supposed Gondour, & was not troubled. I think she also informs

the Bazon belonging to it. The latter was taken from a Maid
of D. Stewart's at the Races in Oct. 1825. If I rightly remember
she said her Husband had got it for putting the white Woman
over Potomac. As the Negroe was afraid, she had credit for
supposed Gondour, & was not troubled. I think she also informed
us that another Negroe of D. Stewart's bought the Gown, &
sold it to a Negroe Woman belonging to some Excellency.
This Gown was of Indian Printz, white ground, with stripes
and Figures of different sorts of red, if not other colors.
The Work was curious & peculiar, an old Country Mantua
maker having been near a Week about it. My Wife
says it is altered for the worse, particularly in the Flounce,
which went all round the Tail. The lining original
overshot the Printz at the Sleeves, which used to be con-
cealed by Cuffs, as they were very short. I understand the
Boarder is turned up-side down. My Wife wanted to
take a nearer View of the Gown; but Mrs. Charles,
countenanced